Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)
From Encyclopedia of Political Communication

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher and protégé of Plato, is considered the Father of the Scientific Method, the creator of formal logic, and one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Western world. He was born in Stagiros in northeastern Greece near the neighboring kingdom of Macedonia. In 367 B.C. he traveled to Athens and joined Plato’s philosophical school, the Academy. Aristotle remained in the Academy for approximately 20 years, first as a student and, later, as a teacher. One of the subjects he taught was rhetoric (rhetorikē). Notes used for his lectures on rhetoric at the Academy are thought to form, in large part, the contents of what is today the text titled Rhetoric. Around the time of Plato’s death in 347 B.C., Aristotle left Athens. Over the next 3 or 4 years, he researched the natural history of the eastern Aegean Sea coast and apparently began work on lecture notes that would later be compiled into the text known today as Politics.

Sometime in 343 or 342 B.C., Aristotle joined the court of King Philip of Macedonia. Aristotle’s father, Nicomachus, had served as personal physician to Philip’s father, King Amyntas. Aristotle tutored the king’s teenage son, Alexander, who later became the Macedonian hegemon, Alexander the Great. However, Aristotle only remained on as royal tutor until 340 B.C. Two years later, Philip’s army defeated the Greek city-states at the Battle of Chaeronea. Following Philip’s assassination in 336 B.C., Alexander ascended the throne, and Aristotle maintained positive relations with him for the next decade.

In 335 B.C. Aristotle founded a school of philosophy in the Lyceum, a gymnasium attached to the temple of Apollo Lyceus, just outside of Athens. Aristotle’s proclivity for walking the colonnaded portico (peripatos) while teaching his students resulted in the school’s common name, the Peripatetic School. At the Lyceum, Aristotle maintained an open library that was encyclopedic in scope and included his writings on rhetoric, logic, politics, ethics, psychology, biology, zoology, physics, meteorology, metaphysics, and poetry. Aristotle accepted Macedonian subsidies for his school and made no secret of his friendship with Antipater, an Alexandrian general appointed by the Macedonian king to serve as ambassador to Athens and later as regent over Greece. Thus, when the sudden death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. resulted in increased anti-Macedonian sentiments, Aristotle fled to the ancient city of Chalcis on the island of Euboea, leaving his school and its library under the direction of one of his students, Theophrastus. Aristotle died the following year.

Unfortunately, much of what Aristotle published during his lifetime has been lost, and most of the
extant texts of Aristotle’s works, including Rhetoric and Politics, are thought to be compilations of Aristotle’s lecture notes combined, in some cases, with the writings of some of his students. Aristotle’s notes on rhetoric seem to have been made available to the public in an organized hand-written format by Andronicus of Rhodes in the mid-first century B.C., but this work was not widely published in print form in the Western world until the latter part of the 15th century A.D.

Aristotle’s extant writings indicate that, like Plato, he was interested in the good life, which Aristotle defined as human happiness (eudaimonia) or human flourishing. However, Aristotle rejected Plato’s approach to gaining the knowledge (epistêmê) necessary to understand how to live the good life. According to Plato, understanding the world in which humans lived and obtaining knowledge about how to live well in it depended upon human comprehension of a transcendent world of ultimate and universal ideas (eide). Aristotle rejected this otherworldliness and insisted that only the knowledge gained through the human senses could be considered true knowledge. Thus, Aristotle’s pragmatic empiricism: collecting, classifying, and systematizing data that were accessible through the human senses. That which motivated Aristotle to study plants and animals, including the human animal, also apparently impelled him to examine the forms of reasoning men used in efforts to persuade others as well as the political systems men had created to govern their fellows.

Both the Politics and the Rhetoric are concerned with human affairs and the means of achieving the good life. Essentially, in the Politics, Aristotle is concerned with which state (i.e., political system) is best for creating conditions conducive to human flourishing. In the Rhetoric, he is concerned with the methods of human reasoning in argumentation that can influence decision making toward human happiness. In both works Aristotle relies on empirical data. His political philosophy developed in the Politics is grounded in examination of 158 political constitutions. In the Rhetoric, Aristotle’s rhetorical theory draws from the Synagoge Tekhnon, his collection of writings by Greek Sophists on the arts of logos and rhetoric, as well as other data.

The Rhetoric begins as a philosophical work and shifts to a technical handbook examining practical reasoning in argumentation within contingent circumstances, or where conditions of uncertainty exist because absolute knowledge is unattainable. Aristotle opens by describing rhetoric as a counterpart (antistrophos) to dialectic (i.e., formal logical discussions), and justifying the study of rhetoric based on its practical usefulness in human affairs. He defines rhetoric “as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” For Aristotle, there are two primary modes of persuasion, or proofs (pisteis): inartistic and artistic proofs. Because inartistic proofs exist prior to the creation of a speech (rhêsis) in various forms of testimonial, physical, and written evidence and need only to be used by the speaker (rhêtôr), Aristotle focuses on the artistic proofs which must be invented by the speaker and demonstrated through speaking. Aristotle describes the three species of artistic proofs as êthos (the character, knowledge, and good will toward the audience that the speaker demonstrates in a given speech), logos (the general case or argument(s) in any given speech), and pathos (the combination of ethos and logos to produce certain emotions in an audience).

Because, for Aristotle, rhetoric is a counterpart to dialectic (i.e., formal logic), he describes two forms of informal logic in which humans engage: the example (paradeigma), which involves inductive reasoning, and the enthymeme (enthymêma) which involves deductive reasoning. The reliance upon examples allows a rhêtôr to generalize from several experiential instances and also to reason from one specific case or instance to another. The enthymeme, on the other hand, with its three-part form—major premise, minor premise, and conclusion—allows the rhêtôr to move from a probability through a
factual or material claim to a specific conclusion. What Aristotle’s syllogism is to formal logic, the enthymeme is to rhetoric. The enthymeme differs from the syllogism in that: (1) it is informal reasoning (i.e., premises may be suppressed or unstated and, thereby, the overall form of the argument truncated); (2) it is designed to be comprehensible by a popular or mass, nonexpert audience; thus, it draws upon generally held principles, common beliefs, or values accepted by audiences as “probably” true or best (which also allows the suppression of a premise); and, (3) it is participatory in that it is designed to encourage the audience to supply or “fill in” what is unstated (i.e., the suppressed premise). For example, consider the following: [Major premise:] We need more honest politicians. [Minor premise:] “Candidate A” has a record of honesty. [Conclusion:] Therefore, we need to re-elect “Candidate A.” If a particular audience accepts the view that there are too many dishonest politicians, the rhētōr making this case can leave the major premise unstated, and argue: We need to reelect “Candidate A,” because s/he is an honest politician.

Aristotle claims that there are three species of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic (or judicial), and ceremonial (epideictic). Deliberative speeches are often political, especially legislative, addressing future actions on the basis of the likelihood of advantage/benefit or disadvantage/harm. Forensic speeches are often, though not always, legal speeches involving accusations (kategoria) or defenses (apologia), addressing past actions on the basis of their apparent justice or injustice. Epideictic addresses are ceremonial speeches, addressing present, existing conditions through praise (eulogistic) or blame (dyslogistic), often of an individual or community's virtue or vice. Aristotle offers both common topics (topoi) for use in any type of speech as well as special topics for each type of speech to which a rhētōr can turn in order to invent arguments for a public address.

In addition to modes of proof and types of reasoning in the three species of rhetoric addressed in Book I and the latter half of Book II, much of Book II addresses the roles of character and human emotions in persuasion. Aristotle stresses the importance of understanding how to arouse and subdue certain emotions in an audience as well as how a speaker can adapt his/her character to the character of the audience. Much of Book III addresses the delivery of a speech in terms of style and arrangement of the parts of the speech. Although Aristotle does not delineate what have come to be known as the “Five Classical Canons of Oration” (Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery), his Rhetoric provided a foundation for later rhetorical theorists, particularly those in Rome, to develop those canons as the guidelines for the production and delivery of public speeches.

In the Rhetoric, Aristotle counsels that a rhētōr’s effectiveness in deliberative speaking depends upon an understanding of the four forms of political constitutions and the differences between them. The Politics treats the subject of types of political systems in much more detail, examining the structures and practices of various types of states with the purpose of recommending that system which Aristotle sees as ideal as providing the most likely circumstances for human flourishing. In Book I, Aristotle argues that the state (i.e., the Greek city-state, or polis) is the result of several natural associations. First is the family, constituted by marriage and slavery to meet daily needs. When greater needs are to be met several families associate in a village. Finally, when several villages unite they create a new association, a state (polis). According to Aristotle, the state originates out of natural needs and continues to exist in order to provide the highest end (telos) of human life, the good life. Thus, for Aristotle, the state is a natural association and “man is by nature a political animal,” fitted by nature with the ability to reason and speak about justice and injustice and, therefore, to live in association with others in a state. In the remainder of Book I, Aristotle addresses issues related to
slavery, private versus common property, and the rule of men over children and wives.

In Book II, Aristotle criticizes Plato’s ideas expressed in his writings, the Republic and the Laws, as well as the ideas of others about utopian states. He singles out for specific examination the structures and practices of political systems in Sparta, Crete, and Carthage, and comments on previous and present lawgivers from Solon to Draco before concluding his commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of existing and theoretical political systems.

Books III and IV are the heart of the Politics and deal with definitions of citizenship, the virtues of citizens, the number and types of governments and those that are true and those that are perverted, an examination of monarchy (kingship) versus the rule of law, and the difficulty of simplifying types of regimes into good and bad, and an introduction to Aristotle’s ideal state. For Aristotle, the citizen is one who participates directly in public deliberations and decisions about public affairs and serves in public offices of the state; citizenship carries both rights and responsibilities. Here rhetoric is involved as each citizen develops toward his end (telos) as a political animal, reasoning and deliberating about justice. Aristotle argues that the virtue of the good citizen differs from the virtue of the good man in that the function of the virtue in the good citizen is to preserve the state. However, in the best state, the virtue of the good citizen is the virtue of the good human being, because the purpose and function of the best state is to lead to the highest form of virtue, the human being living the good life. Thus, Aristotle deems it significant to characterize the different types of regimes. In essence, there are six, three major types which can take a good and bad form: (1) when good, rule by one is a kingship; when bad, a tyranny; (2) when good, rule by the few is aristocracy; when bad, an oligarchy; and, (3) when good, rule by the many is a polity (politeia); when bad, a democracy. Aristotle concludes Book III by advocating what has become a fundamental principle of liberal democracy: the rule of law. Established law is like the rule of reason, whereas rule by a single individual allows for error due to the passions. The most common types of constitutions are democratic and oligarchic and the various forms of these types of regimes provide evidence of their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, Aristotle offers polity as the best form of government, a mixture of aspects from democracies and oligarchies in a state that avoids extreme disparities between rich and poor and has a large middle class that can moderate potential political extremes by either the wealthy or the poor.

Thus Book V deals with the causes of revolutions and means of avoiding them, and Book VI addresses in greater detail aspects of democracies and oligarchies and how people framing new constitutions can learn from the best forms of democracy. Books VII and VIII address Aristotle’s conception of the good life, what is needed in the ideal state for citizens to pursue the good life, and the importance and significant aspects of educating the young in the ideal state. For Aristotle, the relationship between a state functioning to assist individuals in fulfilling their telos in living the good, virtuous life and the practice of the good and virtuous life of a state’s citizens in preserving the ideal state is a symbiotic one.

Further Readings

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